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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political behavior of local school boards in terms of two models of political governance. The first model discussed is the "sacred vs. secular" model that distinguishes between "sacred" governing bodies that reach consensus in private and generally support the sociocultural status quo and "secular" bodies that make policy decisions in public and generally support sociocultural change. Also discussed is the "elite vs. arena" model that distinguishes between "elite" politicians who consider themselves guardians of the public and typically make policy decisions in private, based on their personal views, and "arena" politicians, who consider themselves representatives of the public and typically make policy decisions in public, based on public debate. The author argues that most American boards are sacred and elite and that they express normlessness and anxiety when forced to behave in secular-arena fashion. He also concludes that the public correctly perceives its lack of influence on school policy and desires to participate more in educational policy-making. (JG)

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"Is a School Board Member a Politician or Above Politics?"

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Education, Public Policy, and Politics

By

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The title of this session is, "Is a School Board Member a Politician or Above Politics?" It is interesting to ask, "Is the question a matter of sematics?" I hope to raise the discussion "above sematics"! The very title of this presentation is an attempt to do just that.

We can all agree that setting public policy for local education is what one is about as a person, elected or appointed, performs the role of school board member. That position is stated as a given in the following presentation. Now the prior question can be restated. Can public policy be formulated "above politics?" The obvious answer is, no! Formulating public policy is the heart of the political process and those who engage in it are politicians. The only question that remains is what is the style of the politics of education and how effective are the people (or politicians) who engage in it?

This presentation will not attempt to evaluate how effective are the politicians who engage in the formulation of public policy in education. A few data evaluative of that role performance will be recalled, however. The National Committee for Citizens in Education which works for more citizen participation in education policy making says, "Now more than ever, there exists no mechanisms for public concerns to be expressed in any systematic, meaningful

and productive way on the issue of educational changes.... Despite the statistical dominance of education [in increased allocations of tax dollars], in recent years citizens have become frustrated over their inability to influence decisions concerning it." (N.C.C.E., 1975, pp. 1-2).

But perhaps this is merely one disgruntled group or a national gathering place for many such groups and individuals. (It is in this manner education politicians usually put off protests about policy, stating the group represents only a disgruntled minority and not the "public as a whole"). However, the 1975 Gallop poll on school boards reported that most Americans do not understand what their local school boards are about and only 50 percent of parents of public school children felt their school boards were doing a good job of representing the public. (N.S.B.A., 1975.) These data do not appear to be a very good report card for the politicians setting education public policy.

Models of Political Behavior in Education Public Policy Making

The remainder of this presentation will discuss various political models of education governance at the local level, indicating the political process defined by the model and point to some criteria that might allow one to assess whether one or another political process is likely to provide the politician (the school board member) an opportunity to function in a manner that promotes or corrects the public perceptions indicated above.

The following will discuss two of the many possible models of governance in local education and attempt to draw some conclusions about their appropriateness for governing local education under specified conditions within the respective constituency.

Sacred vs. Secular

The sacred-secular continuum was developed as a local school board governance model by Iannaccone and Lutz (1970). In doing so they drew upon the community type continuum of Becker (1950). A sacred community is a less complex form of society where kinship linkages are important. One thinks of a small rural town as an example of a sacred community. Communication often is by informal gossip and not public means. Insiders know it outsiders do not. Values are shared by the community as norms are shared by the small group. The status quo is valued and any change must be couched in the notion that it represents a very slight modification of tried and true practice. Status and rank is provided in this system by informal trial and error evaluation of known insiders. The outsider is at a disadvantage, looked on with suspicion and fear and at best may be seen as an "alien expert."

A secular community is more complex and differeniated. Rules are public and universalistically applied. Rank and office are given to the most qualified as judged by publically stated and applied criteria. Access to the decision making system is open and public rather than along informal "kinship" lines. Change is sought almost for the sake of change because change is valued. The outside expert is valued and sought after.

Applying these descriptions to local school governance a sacred school board would exhibit the following characteristics.

1. Concensus would be sought in private sessions and decisions enacted into public policy in a ritualistic fashion by a unanimous public vote exhibiting the concensus obtained in private.
2. Values demonstrated by policy decisions would enhance the status quo within the social-cultural structure.

3. The most effective lines of communication and influence would be informal and depend largely and "knowing someone" rather than or in addition to "knowing something."
4. Status, rank and promotion would depend upon various sets of criteria some of which are known only to insiders and accomplishable largely within that society as opposed to outside of it. Most promotions would go to insiders and the outsider would be seen as the alien expert required by an unusual situation.

A secular school board would exhibit the opposite characteristics:

1. Decisions would be made publicly and the avenues for influencing those decisions would be public rather than private.
2. Values demonstrated by policy decisions would enhance change within that society.
3. Lines of communication and influence would to public and available to any person.
4. Status, rank and promotion would be based on personal worth evaluated universalistically, according to publicly known criteria. Thus the outsider would often be sought and employed because of knowledge and ability gained elsewhere.

Elite vs. Arena

The elite-arena model allows a complimentary while somewhat different analysis of local governance. Developed by Bailey (1965) to describe and analyze the policy making behavior of governing councils it has been used chiefly by political anthropologists in their work with African, East Indian and English councils. An Elite council:

1. Reaches concensus in private sessions where the minority exceeds to the majority will making public enactment of the private concensus a unanimous matter in public.
2. Council members think of themselves as separate from and guardians of the people.
3. The executive function is part of the council and nothing can be done unless there is concensus for anyone can impeed the decision as it is operationalized by the council if they do not agree with it.

An arena council on the other hand:

1. Makes policy decisions by the process of public debate and counter debate coming to final policy decisions by majority vote.
2. Council members think of themselves as representatives of specific and different factions or groups and the council is fashioned as the "community in council."
3. The executive function is separate from but responsible to the council and the majority decision is carried out by the administrator as an executive act operationalizing the policy decision of the council.

A Sacred-Elite School Board

Councils that are elite also tend to operate in a sacred fashion. Most decisions are made in private sessions; "working sessions" as they are called by school boards. It is there where disagreements are worked out and a concensus is reached. The board comes to the public meeting, which is constituted to make decisions about public policy, with their minds made up. Here the public is allowed to express their different views after a decision has been made. Then the school board, influenced earlier perhaps by privileged groups through informal channels, enacts by unanimous vote the decision agreed upon earlier.

Members of sacred-elite school boards think of themselves as guardians of and separate from the people. They do not represent nor do they think they should represent public groups. Blanchard (1974) reported that 87 percent of board members surveyed in Kentucky felt they should vote their own judgement regardless of what the public wanted. Whittmer (1976) found a similar trend in Pennsylvania, indicating an extremely low identification of school board members with their constituent public. Edgren (1976) found that citizens in Pennsylvania thought the school administrators listened to them but neither administrators nor board members actually made an effort to use such public input when formulating education policy.

These data tend to confirm other findings indicating that school boards are generally perceived by the public as: making decisions in private; viewing themselves as separate from the public rather than as the body representing the public; making decisions as guardians of the people; basing decisions on their own judgement rather than on the will of the people; and open only to informal influence as opposed to public influence at public meetings. Whether school boards agree or not there is overwhelming evidence that the public views them as sacred-elite bodies and not as secular=arena councils representing the people. There is separate and additional evidence based on empirical observation and "third party" data gathering that suggests that the public is correct in their perception of school board policy making and council type. These include descriptions of large city school boards (Rogers, 1968) as well as smaller boards (Vidich and Bensmon, 1960, and Iannoccone and Lutz, 1970).

Implications

It is well documented that citizens in the United States believe they should have an opportunity to participate in the governance function of public policy development. There are several means through which they may participate, whether they do or not. These include but are not limited to: (1) casting a vote for the representative of their choice, (2) providing money or active support campaigning for the election of a candidate, (3) writing, calling or personally meeting with the elected official in order to express one's views on a public policy, (4) assessing the enacted policies and the representative's vote and based on a determination of whether or not the representative has behaved in a fashion supportive of the constituent's values, voting or failing to vote for the representatives re-election. If it is correct that the public does not view the school board as representing it and that board members do not even think they should vote as the public desires but as they, the board members, believe correct - then it is not likely that the assessment suggested in item four will result in a favorable reaction. The result of prolonged frustration, as predicted in item four, is incumbent defeat.

The fact of the matter is that one would expect much more incumbent defeat of shcool board members, given the feeling expressed in the research cited. There are other data that tend to mediate that predicted result, however. The National School Board Association (1975) also discovered that most of the public interviewed could not name a single member of their board, and could not recall one issue decided by that school board. One might speculate that if there is frustration about public participation in education policy making the public is at a loss to know what to do about it.

It has also been postulated that under certain circumstances sacred-elite school board council behavior is desired and valued by the constituent public.

Lutz (1975) predicted that more homogeneous communities would value elite council behavior, while more hetrogeneous communities would value more arena councils. Wittmer (1976) found evidence to support this contention.

Perhaps more important to this group, however, is the notion of the anomic school board. First proposed in a participant observer study of two local school boards (Gresson 1976) and demonstrated statistically by Wittmer (1976) an anomic board is one whose behavior is normless or in conflict with the norms it proports to hold. The notion was developed based on the idea that school boards are socio-cultural systems and have values and norms, shared by the large majority of local boards, and used to regulate their behaviors (Lutz 1975a). These norms and values are commensurate with the behaviors of sacred-elite councils.

Following Seeman (1959) when one finds himself in a normless condition, where behaviors do not coincide with norms, the situation is anomic and suicidal behavior becomes more common. Given the "Culture of School Boards" local school board members believe they should behave in sacred-elite fashions; they come to concensus, vote unamiously and avoid influence by specific community groups. Occassionally situations arise in a school district that force school boards into public debate and non-unanimous behavior. When this occurs the board members express even more strongly their belief in the sacred-elite norms and their unhappiness and unpredictability with their own behavior. It appears that the usual result of this anomic situation is incumbent defeat and/or involuntary superintendent turnover. The obvious recommendation is to provide norms that allow board members to represent constituences and vote accordingly, and in non-unanimous fashion under given conditions.

Conclusions

Based on the above the following conclusions appear warranted.

1. School board members are politicians who inact public policy in education.
2. School boards are generally sacred-elite councils whose members think of themselves as separate from and guardians of the people.
   a) Boards arrive at a concensus about policy in private sessions.
   b) Then enact these prior decisions in public by unanimous vote.
3. The public perceives correctly that they do not have much influence in that decision-making process and express a desire for more participation.
   a) Board members on the other hand think they should not be influenced by community groups and should vote their <u>own</u> consciences when that is in conflict with public wishes.
4. When, under certain circumstances, a school board finds it necessary to behave in secular-arena fashion (casting non-unanimous votes) they express normlessness and anxiety. This condition may be termed anomie and often results in incumbent defeat and/or involuntary superintendent turnover.
5. To correct this situation it is recommended that school boards be educated to understand that non-unanimous voting behavior is not only reasonable but, under some circumstances, required in order to correctly perform in their elected offices. Under such circumstances not only is non-unanimous behavior required but the public will perceive themselves as not represented by a unanimous council.

6. Presently school boards are perceived by the public as unrepresentative of the people; aloof, uninterested in public opinion, even haughty in their policy decision making behavior. Such may be thought of as a rather serious indictment of a politician in our nation's bi-centennial year.

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